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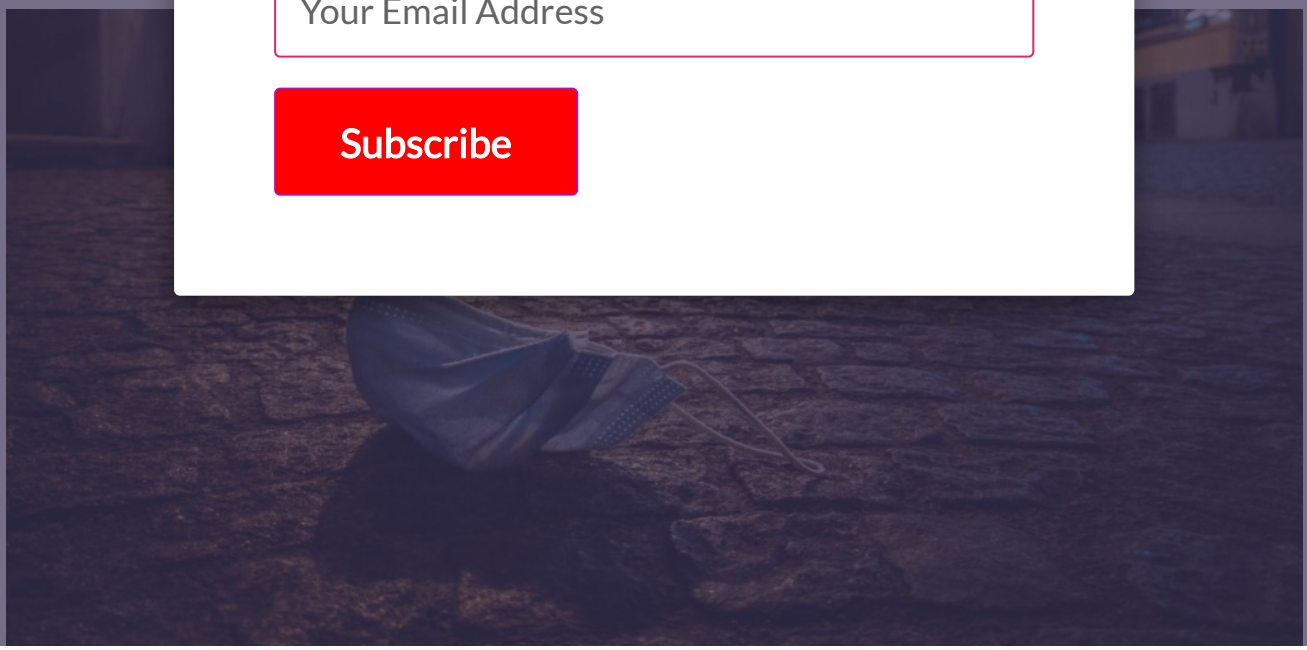

A facemask discarded on the ground. Credit: Ivan Radic / Flickr

A couple weeks ago, there was a rather unusual flurry of articles on a subject that has become somewhat of a taboo in the mainstream media these last few years: COVID-19 (aside from an ongoing trickle of minimizing and misleading opinion pieces on the harms and prevalence of the virus). The occasion for these articles was the fifth anniversary of the start of the pandemic.

Or so it seemed. These articles/retrospectives (in Canada and numerous other countries), whether it was a photo essay of pandemic relics (like social distance signage) or recollections from health care workers and others, looking back on the trauma of those early days, more than anything else, functioned to bookend the pandemic—placing it firmly in the past.

Such articles might strike some as innocuous or even an important act of remembering, when in fact what the mass of articles are most invested in is helping you to forget that Covid is still with us. But while certainty at lower rates than a few years ago, the virus, circulating through all seasons, with multiple waves per year, is still killing off medically vulnerable people significantly more than the flu. And perhaps more significantly Long Covid continues to disable millions of people around the globe. These stats are undoubtedly undercounts as so few people, when ill, given the media narrative that COVID-19 is ostensibly no big deal, bother to test.

And let's be factually clear, the pandemic is not over. At least, according to the World Health Organization which, in being international, does not share the political agenda of any individual country (or at least to a much lesser extent). But you wouldn't know

this from media coverage that consistently commits journalistic malpractice by referring to the pandemic in the past tense with phrases like “during the pandemic” and “post-pandemic” (examples of this are so ubiquitous that I won’t offer links, but a Google search will provide plenty).

I am not claiming this is a conspiratorial collusion among mainstream media outlets, but they have, collectively, manufactured consent for the pandemic’s end nevertheless. As Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman sought to explain in the seminal *Manufacturing Consent,* mainstream media journalists serve the interests of the ruling class because of “(their) reliance… on information provided by government, business, and ‘experts’ funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power.”

In this case, what serves the interest of capital/the ruling class, in declaring Covid a thing of the past, is the tacit permission, from the populace, to return to the socio-economic status quo. “Back to normal” has accelerated Capitalist State abandonment of chronically ill and disabled people. And “back to normal,” with little resistance, has allowed nations to quietly and quickly dismantle the quasi-welfare state of 2020 through 2021 due to the crisis of the pandemic. Ironically, we briefly had a social-democratic state of the kind the institutional left in North America has been fighting for—for decades.

The bookending of the pandemic in mainstream media articles share some common features: upholding the myth of pandemic’s end, thanks largely to vaccination, while also throwing a bone to the very organized and ascending anti-Covid-mitigation Right (that clearly scares the crap out the liberal establishment media). And a crumb or two to sick and disabled people, by acknowledging—while

simultaneously downplaying—the scale and severity of Long-Covid.

Some good examples of such articles can be found in *The Globe and Mail*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times*.

In these aforementioned articles and many others, the manufactured end of the pandemic, necessarily, requires a story of how it started so that they can claim it ended. The mainstream media's misleading story is, more or less, as follows: Public Health responded as best they could, given they were dealing with a novel virus. In hindsight, there was some government overreach, with consequences, particularly that "lockdowns" irreparably led to loss of learning among children. And an unfortunate few suffer from Long-Covid—research is necessary, but somehow, prevention is not.

As an important aside, learning loss, possibly, in part, as a result of a lengthy period of online education, is a legitimate concern, but that's just one part of the story. Left out, is that

Covid has been shown to cause neurological damage. Ignoring such a significant variable can only be explained either by ideologically driven bad faith or just sloppy, lazy journalism that has defined Covid reporting and opinion pieces in the last few years.

Perhaps more importantly, granting "lockdowns" interfered with children's learning development to some degree, they also clearly reduced the amount of deaths from the virus significantly and according to one study could have saved tens of thousands of lives if implemented, in England, sooner. Yet we have a not uncommon genre of "just asking questions" articles, pontificating that while lives were saved, maybe it wasn't worth the downsides. If you scratch the surface

of this question, the implication is that child's development might outweigh the *lives* of immunocompromised, elderly folks, and other at-risk groups. This attitude normalizes eugenic-thinking for audiences—and parents in particular. In addition, there are countless articles from the financial press and right-leaning think tanks, weighing the economic costs of Covid mitigation against human lives.

Back to the main neoliberal narrative: the pandemic ended in 2022 (in the West) thanks to mass-vaccination. In truth vaccination could not keep up with variant mutation: with the arrival of the "mild" Omicron variant, mortality and deaths were nearly as high as at any other point in the pandemic (though this was, in part, due to the sheer volume of the particularly infectious variant). In other words, the "vaccine only" strategy failed.

I also wish to jog people's memory that our politicians and Public Health officers did not drop all Covid mitigations because they claimed the pandemic was over, but because it was time "to live with Covid." Within a few months this morphed into a nebulous consensus that since there were no mitigations, the pandemic must be over. Living with Covid would actually entail, alongside vaccination (and developing better vaccines), universal masking in most places and an investment in cleaning the air inside our buildings, particularly in hospitals, schools and on university campuses. But why spend money on such infrastructure if you can persuade people the pandemic's over, right?

The biggest problem of this intellectually dishonest and/or ignorant neoliberal narrative is that in not acknowledging (or understanding) that the vaccine only strategy failed, mainstream media helped create a huge vacuum for the right-wing's even more historically revisionist narratives to go virtually unchallenged. In short, the Right will tell you

that Covid was never serious except maybe to very medical vulnerable people (who essentially don't count as people from their eugenic perspective), lockdowns were an unlawful assault on civil liberties, vaccines were/are harmful, masks don't work, and Public Health—and this is where disabled-leftists and the right agree, but for completely different reasons—has lost all credibility.

The Right's explanations for the state of affairs range from boiler plate libertarianism to what ought to be crank-conspiracies—attributing various nefarious motives to the government and Public Health response to Covid—have festered, largely unchecked, because the fact-checkers stopped paying attention in 2022. The right got to say what the facts were because no one cared anymore. Except, now we do, again: anti-vaccine conspiracy crank Robert F. Kennedy jr. oversees America's public health agencies, which are themselves all directed by less notorious and outlandish figures, but who share similar dangerous beliefs—that will have fatal outcomes. Such eugenicist libertarians are not isolated to America; they just don't have the power they currently enjoy in the United States—yet.

The only point of disagreement these days between liberals, fuelled by mainstream media, and the right, fuelled by an exploding reactionary podcast-sphere, is whether we should do virtually nothing or completely nothing when the next pandemic hits.

And that next pandemic may well, as some experts are warning, be bird flu (H5N1)—a virus with a potentially 50 per cent fatality rate in humans. That seems like something we, as a society, would be incapable of learning to live with and then forgetting about: but, given the last few years, I wouldn't put it past us.

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